

WOUNDED HEALER

March 12, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture

Isaiah 53:1-6

Luke 20:9-19

**"...the owner of the vineyard said,...'I will send my beloved son;
it may be they will respect him.'"**

-Luke 20:13 (RSV)

When he told that sad story about the vineyard and the cruel tenants, the owner sending servants and finally a beloved son, only to have the son killed by the tenants - when he told that story, did he know? We know that there is a sense in which he is the subject of this story, that God sent prophets to the people and they were rejected. And we know that the beloved son would also be rejected and killed, but did Jesus know?

It was on the first day of the last week of his life. Forces had been set in motion which would result in his arrest, trial and execution. Surely he had some sense of it. The authorities were already looking for the appropriate and safe time to have him arrested. Surely he wondered about it, wondered how in the world the God of love and goodness and mercy could allow things to take a turn like this. The beloved son - killed, almost arbitrarily eliminated. Why, if this is in some way the story of God, don't the tenants welcome the owner's son, arrange a banquet, happily do whatever he wanted them to do? Why, if he is God's son, God's beloved, is this whole project slipping out of control, down a steep, treacherous slope which will end at the foot of a cross? Is this what God wants? Or, what kind of a God is it who wants this?

So just when the days noticeably lengthen, the sun warms, and the prospect of daffodils becomes viable, just when the long gray season is about to surrender to the forces of renewal and resurrection, the church bumps squarely into its most somber motif... the cross. It used to be called Passion Sunday, this fifth Sunday in Lent. I still call it that because I do think we need to have the issue pressed on us; that left to own devices we would much prefer the daffodils and renewed love and hope of Eastertide without all this dark morbidity.

"Why are there no crosses in here?" a woman asked me one Sunday evening after Vespers, slightly irritated it appeared; thinking that we bland Presbyterians had no stomach for this issue, preferring the more

edifying gospel of success through positive thinking and prudent investment. "There was a time," I explained, "that Presbyterians thought ornate, decorative crosses only served to confuse and defuse the issue. The cross as decorative art, misses something, our stern forebears thought." (And then warming to the task...) "More important, look at this place. It is a cross. Gothic architecture is cruciform. That's why it lies here, prone on the corner of Michigan and Delaware, the cross with long stem and cross arms - the cross of Jesus Christ, planted here in the city. That cross is the only reason we bother to be here." But she had long stopped listening, having heard more than she really wanted to hear, and eyes nervously moving from right to left, still looking for a real cross, a plastic or polished oak or burnished brass equivalent of the electric chair. For that is what it was and is and you really can't know what all the shouting is about on March 26 until you understand that - until you stand under it here for a while and sing:

"O sacred Head now wounded,
With grief and shame weighted down;
Now scornfully surrounded
With thorns, Thine only crown."

Is this necessary, really? Couldn't God have prevented it? Wasn't it within the power of the Almighty to get on with the divine agenda without all this messy business?

So for the better part of twenty centuries Christian people have tried to find the right words with which to explain to themselves mostly, why it was that God's only son ends up dead.

Doctrines of the Atonement they are called. And time was when I thought our task was to understand them, choose one, and endorse its reasoning with one's own. Now I'm not so sure. In any event they consume a lot of the history of Christian theology. One of them goes like this. Human beings sin. God is both perfect and just. So someone has to be punished. But because God is also love, God decides to punish someone else instead of us, namely Jesus. A variation on that theme proposes that Jesus is the sacrificial lamb that is slain for the propitiation of the sins of the people. Jesus takes on himself the burden of human sin. Still another sees the cross as the final battlefield between God and sin; life and death.

The trouble with the atonement as an exercise in theology is that it doesn't help me with the true question the cross raises: namely, did Jesus ever wonder about it? Wonder if God really meant for it to come to this and that larger dilemma; what kind of God is this whose love either orchestrates or allows things like the framed-up execution of an innocent young man?

That issue is ever with us. It comes at us from the mammoth suffering that seems to be a part of human existence: innocent people buried in earthquakes, swept out of their airplane seats, caught in the crossfire in Palestine. Why? Why 6,000,000 dead in the concentration camps? Or why one child shaken to its death by the baby-sitter? Hugh Nissenson's new book, The Elephant and My Jewish Problem, is about the

difficulty of being faithful in a violent world. Nissenson is haunted by the children killed in the holocaust. "After that," he said to a New York Times interviewer, "I could no longer believe that God was working in history, that there was a redemption process going on..." [New York Times, 1/4/89] That issue comes at us dramatically in the abstract, as each of us tries to accommodate what we see on television and read in the newspapers with what we believe about God. But it comes to us also, and more urgently, on a much deeper level when we are the sufferer: when someone dear to us dies, when the test comes back positive, when hope fades and the light goes out. Why, God? Why me? Why have you done this, or allowed this? "Why," as Jesus himself asked, "have you forsaken me?"

And again, there are answers, designed to meet the intellectual challenge.

"Suffering results from human sin." And it does, some of it. There is, it would seem, a morality built into the scheme of things. When one people enslaves another people, suffering will result for a very long time. When people are guided by greed instead of responsibility, suffering will result. Cut down the rain forest and dump garbage in the ocean and suffering will result. When the country decides to invest all of its resources in sophisticated machines of death, it can't afford to fight a war against drugs, or educate its poor, or provide health care. Some suffering results from human sin, greed, stupidity. But not all of it: not the children, not the innocent, not the ones sitting in the wrong seat or standing in the wrong place.

"Suffering is God's way to test our faith," is another attempt. And suffering does indeed test and refine faith. But that's a funny way to love people. C. S. Lewis resolved the problem of his wife's untimely death by concluding that God took her to test his faith. And one of his critics simply asked whether or not his wife would be able to see it that way, or her motherless children? Could they be persuaded that God arranged the death of their mother to test their stepfather's faith? That answer makes the problem worse actually.

"Suffering is sent by God to make us better." And sometimes it does. But sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes suffering makes us insensitive and cruel and brutal. That's what the movie "Platoon" was about. It's what has happened in Israeli occupied Palestine and Soweto and Belfast. Besides, couldn't God come up with another teaching method?

As a matter of fact, none of the various attempts to answer the dilemma of human suffering is satisfactory, just as the various doctrines of atonement fail adequately to explain the death of Jesus. Someone has quipped that when it comes to suffering, "theology is always like having six storm windows to cover eight windows." [William Hamilton in Why, God?, Burton Cooper, p. 28] And Simone Weil, "when one finds a comforting reply, first of all, one has constructed it oneself." [Ibid, p. 31]

My proposal is that the faith response to suffering is not at all an answer, a philosophic thesis which will resolve the contradictions inherent in the topic, but a person, an event - Jesus Christ and him crucified. My proposal is that what faith offers is not an answer to the question, but

strong arms to hold us, to comfort us, to help us stand up again after we fall under the weight of some suffering or grief. My proposal is that faith heals, not because the answers are logical but because the healer is wounded.

The ancient Greeks reasoned, with consummate logic, that the chief characteristics of human beings are that they have a heart, passion, love, anger, lust: humans are humans because they have feelings. So, to be God means not to be human, which means not to have feelings. The chief characteristic of God, they believed, was "apatheia," no feeling, detachment, coolness, distance, apathy.

But the God of Israel, the God of the Jewish Scriptures, cares deeply; cares about human beings, gets angry, weeps tears, laughs at them and with them, is touched by their problems. The God of Israel is wounded by their pain; suffers with them. The theological high-water mark of the tradition comes when an ancient prophet writes with heartbreaking beauty -

"Surely he has borne our griefs,
and carried our sorrows.
He was bruised for our iniquities
...and with his stripes we are healed."

Healed by his suffering? Made whole by God's suffering? Could it be? God doesn't cause suffering but is also its victim? God - a wounded healer?

Listen to the sufferers who seem always to say: only a wounded healer can heal. Members of the helping professions are reading an article in the January Atlantic Monthly entitled the "Wounded Healers" which proposes that people become psychiatrists, psychologists, physicians, clergy, because of their own wounds. And while the article is interesting it almost totally overlooks a truth shared by everyone, namely that healers must be wounded in order to heal.

Listen to the sufferers. That is what they will tell you. Henri Nouwen wrote a book whose title I have appropriated, The Wounded Healer in which he says, "no one can help anyone without becoming involved, without entering with his whole person into the painful situation, without taking the risk of becoming hurt, wounded or even destroyed in the process." [p. 72]

Listen to the sufferers... to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, from his prison cell, waiting to die:

"God allows himself to be edged out of the world and on to the cross. God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is exactly the way, and the only way, in which he can be with us and help us... only a suffering God can help." [Letters and Papers from Prison]

Listen to Thornton Wilder, who puts it elegantly: "In love's service only the wounded soldiers can serve." [See Douglas John Hall, God and Human Suffering]

I realized only after I read them that three of the best books available on the topic of suffering were written by parents who had lost children tragically: Rabbi Kushner, When Bad Things Happen To Good People; Burton Cooper, Why, God?; and Nicholas Wolterstorff, Lament for A Son.

They are very wise books. And it is good to listen carefully when they confess what it is like... Wolterstorff's 25 year old son Eric was killed in a mountain climbing accident. He writes so honestly.

"What do you say to someone who is suffering?" he asks, as we all have on occasion and then answers: "If you can't think of anything to say, just say, 'I can't think of anything to say. But I want you to know that we are with you in your grief.' Or even just an embrace. But please: Don't say it's not really bad. Because it is. What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench." [p. 34]

We know that it is not easy to do. We know that every instinct in us is to retreat from suffering, hide from it, disguise it, avoid it. We know that left to our own devices we will construct barriers to keep suffering from penetrating. There is a sense in which physicians must do it. How could you work on the pediatric cancer floor and allow it to get inside? And yet, even those noble people who do it, doctors, nurses, aides, know that there is a sense in which they must be affected by it, must be wounded in order to serve. Nouwen warns candidates for ministry that the aloofness we try to maintain in order to protect ourselves is no help at all. You must, he says, "be willing to cry with those who cry, laugh with those who laugh, and make your own painful and joyful experiences available." [op. cit., p. 72]

Faith's response to suffering is not an answer but a person - a suffering Lord, and a community of solidarity and love, one of whose primary purposes is to stand along side those who suffer. That is the holiest vocation of all and it happens in the church but also in strange and unlikely places when human beings reach out in love to each other and hold each other close.

It happens with magnificent integrity in a wonderful play, "Steel Magnolias." It is about five women and a beauty shop. Five very different women whose relationship seems to be about what it ought to be among five women who meet in the beauty shop at the same time weekly, or five men at the barber shop. They talk about their lives, their stories, their hopes, joys, disappointments... And then one of them loses a child, an adult child, and this wounded mother comes to the beauty shop, and talks about her daughter's death and how she was the only one who could stand to stay with her to the end. And she is being very brave and then she begins to be honest... and the beauty parlor owner, Truvy, begins to take on the pain and reaches out and expresses concern and the wounded woman says...

"I feel fine. I feel great. I could jog to Texas and back, but my daughter can't. I am so mad I don't know what to do. I want to know why. I want to know why Shelley's life is over. How is that baby ever going to understand how wonderful his mother was? Will he ever understand? Lord, I

wish I could. It's not supposed to happen this way. I am supposed to go first. I've always been ready to go first. I can't stand this. I just want to hit somebody until they feel as bad as I do..."

And this little group of friends, this blessed community, this church if ever there was a church, gathers around her because they are wounded deeply by what has happened and with tears but also laughter, healing starts, right there in the beauty shop. [Steel Magnolias, Robert Harling, p. 67, 68]

God's son died. God gave the world a child. And the child died. God has suffered the most exquisite pain any of us will ever suffer. That's what the cross of Jesus is about.

"Instead of explaining our suffering God shares it," Nicholas Wolterstorff says near the end of his little book. "We're in it together, God and we. Every act of evil extracts a tear from God, every plunge into anguish extracts a sob from God." [p. 81, 91]

It is Passion Sunday. And before we celebrate the Good News of Easter morning, we are invited to ponder, to enter into, to celebrate, the Good News of Jesus' death.

The Cross is the supreme symbol of our faith. Every time we walk into this building we enter into it. It is the promise that the one who made us loves us, has experienced our life, has died our death. It is the promise that there is nowhere we can go, even into the deepest valleys of the shadow of death, that our Lord has not preceded us.

To be sure, that lonely cross is a symbol of suffering and evil, and injustice and cruelty and of everything that is wrong with the world and the human condition. But it becomes, by faith, something infinitely more than that. It becomes, not just what cruel people did to Jesus of Nazareth, but what a loving God does for us. And therefore, a promise of love and hope and healing for our wounds, and light for our darkness.

Amen.

God of love, we don't understand it, but in this season, as we approach again, in humility and awe, the cross of our Lord, gather us in your strong arms and help us to know that because of that cross, we are safe and free. Amen.